

Conclusion and Recommendations

To make sound decisions about food and farming — from consumer decisions about food to public policies that will determine the future of our food system — it is essential to be able to separate industry spin from science and PR campaigns from public education. But today, with the industrial food sector spending hundreds of millions of dollars every year on front groups, third-party messengers, social media campaigns and other covert marketing tactics to spin the story of food, it is increasingly difficult to sort truth from fiction. The good news is that public interest groups and sustainable food advocates, despite having a tiny fraction of resources, are reaching far more people through community organizing, people-to-people education and social media. (See Annex 2 for our comparison of the public-interest bloggers and advocacy groups and industry front groups.)

The evidence also shows that the public's demand for organic and non-GMO food, and support for sustainable farmers and sound food policies, continues to grow. However, if industry-sponsored misinformation and covert communications is left unchecked, it may become increasingly difficult to maintain market momentum toward healthier food and build public support for policies that incentivize sustainable food and farming systems.

By shedding light on how the industrial food and agriculture sector is manipulating public discourse, our hope is that this report will encourage journalists, opinion leaders and the public to bring rigorous scrutiny to the veracity of industry's messages and messengers. To have an honest conversation, we need to expose this industry influence and make sure that we're hearing the real story. Not spin.

What media institutions can do: We encourage media institutions to become familiar, if they're not already, with the landscape of food-industry PR tactics and front groups. We encourage media outlets to provide adequate funding for investigative reporting necessary to reveal conflicts of interest and to support their staff to report on the complicated issues involved in food and agriculture policy. We also urge media institutions

to maintain robust conflict of interest policies and make those transparent to readers.

What the public can do: We all can play a role by becoming more savvy media consumers: We can be vigilant about looking out for these front groups and their representatives in media stories and be aware when these tactics are being deployed to sway public opinion. We can also engage with the media outlets we rely on, speaking up if and when we see front groups or their spokespeople portrayed as independent sources in news stories and expressing appreciation when stories on these complex issues are reported thoroughly. We can also educate ourselves on these issues from trusted academic institutions and non-profit organizations working for the public good, not in the corporate interest.

What environmental, public health and sustainable food advocates can do: It is as crucial as ever to counter this spin by providing the media and the public with clear, science-based evidence about the benefits of sustainable food systems as well as the impacts of industrial agriculture — from the threats of antibiotic overuse to the harms of toxic chemicals in the field. To do this work and win key policy battles ahead, it is also vital that these groups strengthen their public education efforts and expand their communications capacity.



Organizational Resources

Center for Public Integrity:

www.publicintegrity.org

A nonprofit investigative journalism organization that releases reports via its website to media outlets throughout the U.S. and around the globe. CPI is one of the largest nonpartisan, nonprofit investigative centers in America.

Center for Responsive Politics:

www.opensecrets.org

The Center for Responsive Politics is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research group that tracks the effects of money and lobbying on elections and public policy. Its website, OpenSecrets.org, allows users to track federal campaign contributions and lobbying by lobbying firms, individual lobbyists, industry, federal agency and bills. Other resources include the personal financial disclosures of all members of the U.S. Congress, the president, and top members of the administration.

LittleSis: www.littlesis.org

LittleSis is a free database detailing the connections between powerful people and organizations. It tracks the key relationships of politicians, business leaders, lobbyists, financiers, and their affiliated institutions.

SourceWatch: www.sourcewatch.org

Produced by the Center for Media and Democracy, SourceWatch tracks corporate spin and front groups and houses a user-friendly database on these groups and activity.

U.S. Right to Know: www.usrtp.org

A nonprofit organization devoted to exposing what the food industry doesn't want us to know about what's in our food.

Recommended Readings

- “The Best Public Relations Money Can Buy,” by Michele Simon and the Center for Food Safety. Available at http://www.centerforfoodsafety.org/files/front_groups_final_84531.pdf
- “The Misinformation Industry,” by The Center for Public Integrity. Available at <http://www.publicintegrity.org/politics/consider-source/misinformation-industry>
- “Seedy Business: What Big Food is Hiding with Its Slick PR Campaign,” by Gary Ruskin and U.S. Right to Know. Available at <http://usrtp.org/gmo/seedy-business/>

Articles and reports documenting industry spin:

- “The Assault on Organics,” Freedom and Accuracy in Reporting, July 1, 2014, by Kari Hamerschlag and Stacy Malkan. Available at <http://fair.org/extra-online-articles/the-assault-on-organics/>
- “Follow the Honey: Seven ways pesticide companies are spinning the bee crisis to protect profits,” Friends of the Earth, April 28, 2014, by Michele Simon. Available at: <http://libcloud.s3.amazonaws.com/93/f0/f/4656/FollowTheHoneyReport.pdf>
- “Big Ag’s Fight for Twitter Credibility,” Food First, February 17, 2015, by Teresa K. Miller. Available at: <http://foodfirst.org/big-ag-fight-for-twitter-credibility/>
- “How PR is Killing Journalism,” Take Part, February 13, 2015, by Eric Alterman. Available at: <http://www.takepart.com/feature/2015/02/13/pr-jobs-journalism-jobs>